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# The Effect of Implicit and Explicit Types of Feedback on Learners' Pragmatic Development

Zahra Fakher Ajabshir\*

*Bonab University, Bonab, East Azarbaijan, Iran*

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## Abstract

Having adopted a pretest- posttest design with a control group, this study investigated the effects of implicit and explicit corrective feedback on pragmatic development of Iranian EFL learners. Having received explicit instruction, forty intermediate participants in this study received explicit type of feedback (metalinguistic explanation) and implicit type of feedback (recast) in response to any utterance containing an error in doing the role plays of refusals. One week after a treatment lasting 10 days, pragmatic acquisition was measured by a Discourse Completion Test. Results of Chi-square indicated that both treatment groups outperformed the control group and the proportion of using all subcomponents of polite refusal strategy except for one of the subcomponents outweighed in explicit group compared with implicit group.

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**Keywords:** Implicit feedback; explicit feedback; refusal speech act; pragmatic development

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## 1. Introduction

It is claimed that without knowledge of pragmatics, second and foreign language learners can successfully perform under two circumstances: when some universal pragmatic knowledge operates (e.g., indirect ways of expressing pragmatic intent; politeness phenomena) or when both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge can be positively transferred from the first language to the target language. Despite the opportunities to take advantage of

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +989141200182  
E-mail address: [fakherzahra@yhao.com](mailto:fakherzahra@yhao.com)

these nonnative speakers' assets, learners may not know how to use what they already know (Kasper, 2001). Indeed, research into pragmatic competence of adult foreign language learners demonstrated that pragmatics of EFL learners and native speakers are quite different and that grammatical development does not guarantee the comparable level of pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). There is evidence which indicates that EFL learners were more aware of grammatically incorrect utterances than pragmatically inappropriate utterances (Bardovi-Harlig, & Dornyei, 1998). These studies suggest that without a pragmatic emphasis in foreign language lessons, learners would not have strong pragmatic awareness, and that it is useful, and possibly essential to explicitly teach appropriate foreign language pragmatic realization patterns of speech acts.

In the course of instructional intervention for interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) in foreign language classrooms, the need for providing different types of feedback on the felicitous/infelicitous realizations of the speech acts is unavoidable. Although a great deal of L2 learning takes place through exposure to comprehensible input, learners may require negative evidence (i.e., information about ungrammaticality) in the form of either feedback on error or explicit instruction, when they are not able to discover through exposure alone how their interlanguage differs from the L2. A point of focus in the current study is the explicitness and implicitness of the feedback and whether the manner of the correction affects restructuring learners' interlanguage.

Although there is a wealth of research on the effect of explicit and implicit types of feedback in the areas of grammar, lexis and phonology, the effect of different types of feedback on interlanguage pragmatic development has been explored for less. Having an idea of the extent to which explicit and implicit error correction can be effective in restructuring the learners' interlanguage is theoretically and pedagogically critical. It may provide a clear understanding of how human cognitive system operates when acquiring a second language. Also, it may afford practitioners better strategies in choosing when to correct the learners explicitly and when to do so implicitly.

Following this line of inquiry, the present study investigated the effects of explicit and implicit instruction, in which the explicit and the implicit conditions operationalised via the metalinguistic feedback and recast in the pragmatic realm. The following question was addressed in this study:

Is pragmatic information of refusal speech act learned more effectively with explicit or implicit types of feedback?

## 2. Background

There are two ways of helping draw learners' attention to target features during tasks: explicit and implicit correction. There are some studies in favor of explicit forms of feedback (Spada, 1997; Seedhouse, 1997) and others which give preference for implicit uses of corrective feedback (Ilis, 1995; Long, 1996). Gass (1988) argued that without direct or frequent negative evidence in the input which would permit learners to detect discrepancies between their learner language and the target language, fossilization might occur. Seedhouse (1997) asserted that teachers' preferences for implicit uses of corrective feedback mark linguistic errors as embarrassing and problematic. He argued in favor of more direct and overt corrective feedback so that "pedagogy and interaction would then work in tandem" (p. 572). In survey of more than 30 studies investigating the effects of form focused instruction, including either direct teaching or corrective feedback, Spada (1997) concluded that an explicit focus appeared to be particularly effective in communicatively based or content-based L2 classrooms.

The results of Lyster and Ranta's (1997) study indicated that elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, and repetition led to learner-generated repair more successfully than recast and explicit correction because the first four different types of corrective feedback made learners more aware of their errors and allowed for learner-generated repair. Samuda (2001) argued that a teacher may be able to guide learners' attention towards form-meaning relationships using either implicit or explicit techniques, but she found that explicit feedback involving metalinguistic comments and elicitation was needed to prompt learners into using the target features.

Two experimental studies in laboratory situations gave approval to explicit forms of feedback. Mackey and Philp (1998) compared the effects of interaction with and without recasts on the production and development of question forms. They found that advanced learners benefited more from interaction with intensive recasts than from interaction without recasts. Recasts however, have not fared as well when compared to more explicit forms of feedback in other laboratory studies with adults. Nevertheless, as the experimental studies demonstrated, recasts

work when they are focused and only when linguistic structures are within reach of learners' morpho-syntactic ability (Mackey & Philp, 1998) as specified by the processability theory of Pienemann. Along similar lines, Carroll and Swain (1993) studied the effects of negative evidence on the learning of the dative alternation rule in English. The group receiving explicit metalinguistic feedback outperformed all groups, including the recast group. Also, there is some evidence (Nagata, 1993) that detailed metalinguistic feedback works better than less detailed metalinguistic feedback.

In contrast to the above-mentioned studies, there have been a number of studies lending support to implicit forms of feedback (Ellis, 1994; Long, 1996). In a study by Panova and Lyster (2002) 10 hours of transcribed interaction was analyzed. The results revealed a clear preference for implicit types of reformulative feedback, namely, recasts and translation, leaving little opportunity for other feedback types that encourage learner-generated repair. Consequently, rates of learner uptake and immediate repair of error were low in this classroom.

Advocating implicit forms of feedback, Ellis (1994) argued that provision of negative evidence especially in the form of implicit types of feedback facilitates the development of L2 syntactic ability. Similarly, Long (1996) gave support to the relatively implicit use of interactional moves, including, "various input and conversational modifications, which immediately follow learner utterances and maintain reference to their meaning" (p. 452). According to the interaction hypothesis, such responses provide learners with negative evidence that in turn facilitates language development. Along similar lines, Lyster (1998) asserted that providing learners in communicatively oriented contexts with signals that facilitate peer- and self-repair may draw their attention to target-nontarget mismatches more effectively than merely supplying target forms in the interactional input. That is, the retrieval of target language knowledge that results in self-repair following a teacher's metalinguistic clue or elicitation move requires more attention to the analysis of target-nontarget mismatches than does repetition of a teacher's recast or explicit correction.

The implicitness inherent in functional properties of forms of implicit feedback may cause ambiguity on the part of the learners. Chaudron (1988) argued that such ambiguity constitutes one of the most noted problems with corrective feedback; teachers' semantically contingent responses can serve several functions, of either a positive or negative nature (correcting, agreeing, appreciating, etc.), thus leading to a problem for L2 learners for whom "the modification may be imperceptible or perceived as merely an alternative" (p. 145). A descriptive study of the various types of recasts used by teachers in content-based classrooms (Lyster, 1998) concluded that young learners faced uncertainty being unlikely to notice the majority of recasts in these contexts as negative evidence. The findings revealed that teachers used recasts following ill-formed learner utterances in the same ways that they use noncorrective repetition following well-formed learner utterances. Consequently, recasts, similar to noncorrective repetitions, were perceived by learners as positive evidence information about what is acceptable in the target language rather than negative evidence.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The present study addressed the effect of explicit and implicit types of feedback on the learners' proficient use of refusals. The study was carried out with forty female learners of EFL in an institute in Bonab, East Azerbaijan, Iran. There were three classes of fourteen, fourteen and twelve students and everybody expressed their agreement to take part in the study before the treatment. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 32 sharing Azeri as their first language. They all had passed their elementary and pre-intermediate levels of English course. Administering a pretest indicated that they were intermediate learners of English, the level of proficiency that made them eligible to participate in the activities designed for this study. Their average length of receiving formal English instruction was seven years and none of them had the experience of residence in English speaking countries.

#### **3.2. Instruments**

Research data were gleaned through a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT) which was in the form of a questionnaire introducing some natural situations to which the respondents were expected to respond when making refusals. It is argued that a DCT is an effective means of data collection when the purpose of the study is to "inform about speakers' pragmalinguistic knowledge of the strategies and linguistic forms by which communicative acts can

be implemented and about their sociopragmatic knowledge of the context factors under which particular strategic and linguistic choices are appropriate'' (Kasper, 2000, p. 329). Since the goal of the present study was to scrutinize the participants' use of refusal speech acts, a DCT was believed to be an adequate instrument to use.

### 3.3. *Target structure*

The target structure in this study was the speech act of refusal. Refusals are known as a "sticking point" in cross-cultural communication (Beebe et al., 1990). They are a complex and tricky to perform due to the inherent possibility of offending the interlocutor for failure to refuse appropriately might endanger the interpersonal relations of the speakers (Kwon, 2004). From a pedagogical point of view, refusals are worth investigating because not only do L2 learners need to recognize the linguistic forms necessary to produce the speech act, but they must also be aware of sociocultural values that characterize the target speech community; that is, learners must be sensitive to the target culture in order to communicate appropriately in any given situation (Cohen, 1996).

It has been argued that saying no is difficult for nonnative speakers. How one says no is more important in many societies than the answer itself. Therefore, sending and receiving a message of no is a task that needs special skill. The interlocutor must know when to use the appropriate form and its function, the speech act and its social elements depending on each group and their cultural-linguistic values (Al-Kahtani, 2005).

### 3.4. *Treatment*

The present study adopted pretest-posttest design with a control group. Forty participants were randomly assigned to one of the three groups consisting of the two treatment groups (N = 14) and the control group (N = 12). The experimental groups were distinguished by presence or absence of feedback, receiving implicit feedback in the form of recast and explicit feedback in the form of metalinguistic explanation.

The treatment lasted ten days, three sessions of forty-five minutes. All groups received explicit instruction. First, the teacher described some situations in which people had to request something and others wanted to say no and refused doing it. Then, learners listened to a conversation which depicted a request/refusal event. It followed by questions focusing on the gist of the dialogue, transcripts with speech act realizations and explicit discussions of sociopragmatic conventions of speech acts. Next, learners were given an inductive presentation of semantic formula and modifiers which were followed by further examples with description of semantic formulae which the teacher went over with the learners.

Next, learners engaged in role play activities. The role-plays proceeded as follows: First, the students received a card showing a role-play scenario. These described the situations and their roles and required the participants to start the role play and to ask something from their interlocutors with their interlocutors refusing. The role plays were classified into two categories on the basis of the sociopragmatic factor of status: Equal Status (equal social status between a speaker and an interlocutor e.g., two friends): Higher Status (higher social status of an interlocutor than that of a speaker, e.g., a clerk and the boss). The cards were swapped between the students to get sure that all the students practiced the role plays in all the situations.

After getting the cards, the students had a chance to ask any questions about it. Although they were permitted to make some notes, they were instructed not to write down the entire set of acting-out utterances. Pairs of students performed the role-play for practice and then the partners switched roles in the scenario. While doing the role plays in groups of two, the teacher walked around to assist their interactions with providing Recast to implicit group and Metacognitive explanation to explicit group. Recasts involved the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance, minus the error. Metalinguistic feedback contained comments, information or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form.

Finally, individuals role-played with the instructor in front of the class, with the teacher providing reactive feedback in the form of comments on felicitous/infelicitous realizations of the speech acts when necessary. During one class session, every student had a chance to perform individually with the teacher once.

While the experimental groups received feedback, the control group had their usual class like other sessions;

doing some review, checking the exercises and doing some warm up discussions to teach the new conversation. The control group received the explicit instruction without any type of feedback. Following three sessions of treatment, a modified version of Discourse Completion Test (DCT) developed by Beebe et al, (1990) was administered to evaluate students' pragmatic development one week after the treatment.

### 3.5. Feedback

Reactive feedback to experimental groups was provided in two cases. When a learner made an inappropriate speech act and when the learner made an appropriate speech act but with an incorrect linguistic form, the teacher provided one of the target conventions in the form of metalinguistic explanation or recast. The teacher ignored other cases. The following examples are revealing:

#### *Pragmatically correct and grammatically incorrect form*

(Scenario: Borrowing a book)

S: I was grateful if you lend me your book.

T: I'd be grateful if you lend me your book. (Recast)

#### *Grammatically correct and pragmatically incorrect form*

(Scenario: Planning for a trip)

S: You live near the bus station Peter. Could you check the bus times for us on the way home tonight?

P: No, I can't tonight. Sorry.

T: The form you used is not polite. You need an apology formulae and/or an explanation. (Metalinguistic explanation)

## 4. Data analysis

In order to have a sound analysis of the data, the data were parsed into four different subcomponents of polite refusal strategies, namely "Hesitation", "Giving an excuse", "Saying she is sorry" and "Giving a positive opinion". In this study, the students' responses in the posttest were analyzed for these components. The unit of analysis was "Semantic Formulae" which is defined as a word, phrase, or sentence that "meets a particular semantic criterion or strategy; any one or more of these can be used to perform the act in question" (Cohen, 1996, p. 265).

On the basis of the four categories mentioned above, the number of the subcomponents used in the participants' responses was counted. Also, the posttest of both implicit and explicit feedback groups were analyzed by Chi-Square to show that whether there was any significant difference between the performance of each experimental group compared with that of the control group.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The data related to four categories of refusal strategy used by explicit feedback group were provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Chi-Square test for subcomponents of refusal strategy for explicit feedback group

Subcomponent	Df	P-value
Hesitation	1	.023
Giving an excuse	1	.028
Saying she's sorry	1	.14
Giving a positive opinion	1	.045

The results of Chi-Square test for "hesitation" shows that the P-value number (0.023) is less than 0.05. This means that there is a significant difference between control and explicit feedback groups in the use of hesitation. Compared with the control group, more amounts of hesitation words like 'mm, uhm, let me think and I'm not sure were used by the explicit feedback group. It can be implicated that explicit feedback in the form of metalinguistic explanation can improve learners' pragmatic development.

Having a cursory glance at table 1, again one can see that the P-value number (0.028) is less than 0.05 which means that there is a significant difference between control and explicit feedback groups in the use of “giving an excuse”. So, explicit feedback has an effect on the pragmatic development of the learners regarding their use of giving an excuse.

From the table 1, it is clear that with regard to the strategy “she is sorry”, P-value number (0.14) is more than 0.05 which implies no effect of explicit feedback on the use of this strategy. Also, it is obvious that in “giving a positive opinion”, the difference between the explicit feedback and the control group is significant. This means that the learners indicated development in using positive opinions in their refusal. They tended to use utterances like “that sounds fun, but.....”, “It looks great, but.....” in explicit feedback group comparing with control group.

For the purpose of convenience of interpretation, comparison of explicit feedback group with control group was provided in Figure 1.

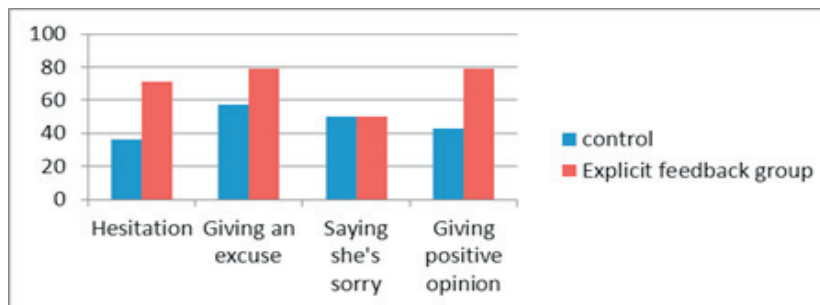


Figure 1. The use of subcomponents of refusal strategy in control and explicit feedback group

The data related to the analysis of the responses of implicit feedback group compared with control group was provided in table 2.

Table 2. Chi-Square test for subcomponents of refusal strategy for implicit feedback group

Subcomponent	Df	P-value
Hesitation	1	.032
Giving an excuse	1	.19
Saying she's sorry	1	.045
Giving a positive opinion	1	.048

Table 2 shows that the number of the participants who used the hesitation strategy in their refusal is more than that of control group. It can be argued the implicit type of feedback has a positive effect on the pragmatic proficiency of the learners.

We see that the P-value is 0.19 which is more than 0.05. It shows that there is not a significant difference between control and experimental groups in the use of “giving an excuse” strategy implying no significant effect of implicit feedback on learners’ pragmatic development with regard to the use of this specific category. Also, the strategy “saying she’s sorry” outnumbered in implicit feedback group than the control group.

As can be seen in table 2, the number of the students providing positive opinion in polite refusing outnumbered those of the control group implying the positive effect of implicit feedback on pragmatic proficiency.

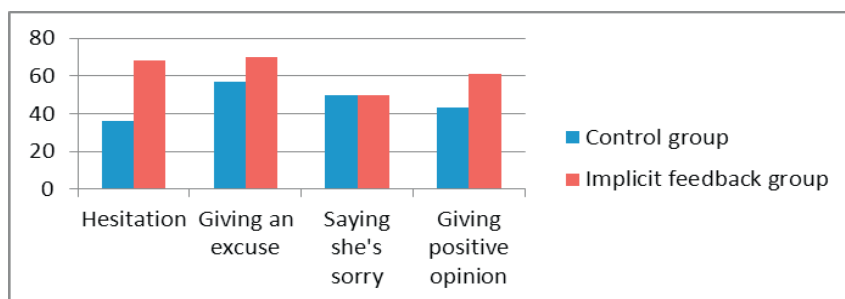


Figure2.The use of subcomponents of refusal strategy in control and implicit feedback group

Analysis of data gathered from the posttest indicated that all in all, giving feedback leads to outperformance of the students in pragmatic tasks. This finding corroborates the findings of Carroll and Swain (1993) who investigated the effects of providing different kinds of feedback on learners' responses and found that all the experimental groups that received either implicit feedback or explicit feedback outperformed the control group that did not.

The results of the present study show- that when participants were provided with the explicit feedback, they used different subcomponents of the refusal strategy more than control group. An exception is the use of the subcomponent of saying "she's sorry" for which no significant difference was observed between the explicit feedback and the control group.

Compared with control group the participants in implicit feedback group outperformed all the subcomponents of polite refusal strategy except for "giving an excuse" which didn't receive much attention on the part of the implicit feedback group. Figure 3 shows the comparative analysis of the explicit and implicit feedback groups in the use of different subcomponents of the polite refusal.

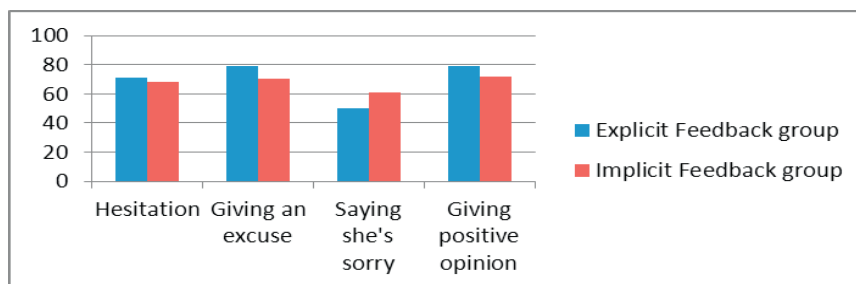


Figure 3.The use of subcomponents of refusal strategy in implicit and explicit feedback group

Also, from figure 1, it is clear that the proportion of using all subcomponents of polite refusal strategy except for "saying she is sorry" outweighed in explicit group compared with implicit group. This finding corroborates the results of the studies conducted by Nagata (1993), Carrol (2001) and Havranek et al., (2003) who indicated the advantage of explicit corrective feedback. The fact that explicit feedback was more effective than implicit one in forcing learners to use the strategies of refusals may be due to some reasons. First, as put forward by Dabaghi and Basturkmen (2008), explicit correction leads to more attention on the part of the learners and when the learners are corrected explicitly on their errors, a contrast with the form in their interlanguage is created. Ellis (1991) claims that for an acquisition to occur, learners must notice, compare and integrate the feedback. The explicit correction in the form of metalinguistic feedback may have caused the learners to notice the gap between the target feature and the form in their interlanguage leading them to incorporate the form in their interlanguage. Second, explicit correction might be better able to help the learners test hypotheses about the target features. Chaudron (1998) argues that the



information in the feedback helps learners confirm, disconfirm and modify transitional rules in their interlanguage. The learners who are provided with implicit instruction may encounter ambiguity with regard to what was wrong with their erroneous utterances and without an understanding of errors they cannot revise their hypothesis. Finally, most learners perceive explicit correction as corrective feedback requiring them to correct their errors whereas this is not a case with implicit feedback. They may perceive the implicit feedback as providing the negative evidence but rather as confirmation of the utterances and helping the flow of the communication.

## 6. Conclusion

The research question in this study asked “is pragmatic information of refusal speech act learned more effectively with explicit or implicit types of feedback”? The answer is “yes”. Two main results of the study were that (1) both experimental groups performed better in posttest compared with the pretest and (2) explicit group outperformed the implicit group and the implicit group outperformed the control group (explicit>implicit>control group).

The first result indicated that provision of negative feedback is more effective than not providing it. When accompanying communication breakdowns, negative feedback of different types related to problematic production is more effective than positive evidence alone. This feedback can facilitate development in part because it comes at a moment when the gap between the learner’s system and the target language is apparent to the learner. Moreover, types of feedback provided in this study were in the form of metalinguistic explanation and recast with none of them supplying the correct form explicitly mostly leading to self-repair. It was proposed that pushing learners in their output rather than providing them with correct forms could benefit their interlanguage development (Vigil & Oller, 1976). On elaboration of the need for feedback, Gass and Varonis (1994) concluded from their study of dyadic interaction that supplying feedback provides the opportunities for learners to detect such discrepancies and “that the awareness of the mismatch serves the function of triggering a modification of existing L2 knowledge, the results of which may show up at some later point in time”.

The fact that explicit group outperformed the implicit group corroborates some of the findings in this area (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Nagata, 1993) which claim that explicit feedback which raises the learners’ consciousness and contributes either directly or indirectly to interlanguage development is more effective than implicit techniques which always run the danger of not being perceived as corrective in purpose.

This study may have some implications for language teachers. In the context of communicative activities, teachers shouldn’t hesitate about providing explicit feedback, but whenever the situation arises they should supply the explicit feedback. The future research may include different levels of feedback with different proficiency levels and various levels of implicitness and explicitness.

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